

# **Are African Libraries active participants in today's Knowledge and Information Society? 1**

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## **Abstract**

This paper highlights the concept 'knowledge and information society'; reviews the status of libraries in Africa; and explores the challenges facing libraries in today's society. The study concludes that while some African libraries, and South African libraries in particular, are actively part of the knowledge and information society, the same cannot be said for most libraries in Africa.

Keywords: knowledge society, information society, information age, Africa, Libraries

## **Introduction**

I would like to divide my presentation into four sub-themes. First, I wish to highlight and contextualize the concepts 'knowledge society' (KS) and 'information society' (IS) in order to show how a library space functions in the KS/IS social environment. Second, I intend to provide an overview of libraries in Africa, and then highlight the challenges and note the opportunities for libraries in today's information age. Finally, I will give some concluding remarks and suggest an agenda for the future.

Society has significantly transformed from hunting, agrarian, industrial, post-industrial - information and knowledge societies or third industry or "Third Wave" as Alvin Toffler (1991) puts it. When Daniel Bell conceived the concept Post-Industrial Society he also strongly referred to Information Society (including a mention of knowledge society.), as discussed extensively by Duff (1998) and Moodley (2004) in the 1960's. He came across tendencies such as the 'post-industrial workforce', information flows and the computer and 'information revolution' or "Network Society" as Manuel Castells (1996, 1997, 1998) put it in his seminal work, "The Information Age". This latter

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1. A shorter version of this paper was presented by the author at the Fifteenth Jubilee Crimea Conference 2008, Crimea, Sudak, Ukrain, 7<sup>th</sup> - 15<sup>th</sup> (see <http://iliac.ru/win/inter-events/crimea2008/eng/cd/156.pdf>)

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stage (the knowledge and information society) has delivered to contemporary society, through the extensive use of Information and Communication Technology (ICTs), a global/ wired / telematic society increasingly interconnected or networked through a seamless information flow and knowledge sharing that some consider scary and others extremely enlightening. The information and knowledge society is increasingly shaping the present and future societies. There are two strands of definitions of information society and knowledge society. One is generic, macro and inclusive. Another is specialized, micro, exclusive and largely technocentric. In order to better define the concept information society (that I also feel replicates a lot with knowledge society) I will first go for an inclusive/macro definition to quote the sentiments expressed at the World Summit on Information Society in Geneva and Tunis (2005) by the World leaders.

*“information society, is a society that uses digital revolution in ICTs for free flow of information, ideas and knowledge through the internet, wireless technologies and libraries in order to “build a people-centered, inclusive and development-oriented Information Society, where everyone can create, access, utilize and share information and knowledge, enabling individuals, communities and peoples to achieve their full potential in promoting their sustainable development and improving their quality of life”.*

Put another way (micro), the information society is:

*“...society which makes extensive use of information networks (meaning systems of IT hardware and services which provide users with delivery and retrieval services in a given area, e.g. electronic mail, directories and video services) and IT (Information technology meaning the hardware, software and methods used for the automatic processing and transfer of data, and skills needed to use them), produces large quantities of information and communication products and services, and has a diversified content industry” (Nassimbeni, 1998:154, citing McColgan of Finland’s Council of State).*

The concepts of knowledge society and information society are closely related. In Bells words, *“knowledge is that which is objectively known, an intellectual property, attached to a name or a group of names and certified by copyright or some other form of social recognition (e.g. publication)” (Bell, 1973:176).* I find UNESCO’s World Report, “Towards Knowledge Societies” (2005), very comprehensive in defining and contextualizing knowledge societies, where they argue that they are *“about capabilities to identify, produce, process, transform, disseminate and use information to build and apply knowledge for human development” (2005:27).* KS is viewed as a source of development because of the recognition and acknowledgment of the importance of human rights, freedom of expression and empowerment, and fight against poverty.

They are also viewed in terms of ‘digital solidarity’ geared towards the bridging of the ‘digital divide’ caused by limited access to infrastructure or connectivity, affordability, and/or exclusion because of inappropriate ‘content’. Libraries, particularly academic libraries, have been popularly referred to as ‘temples’ of knowledge for centuries. They are therefore expected to play a fundamental role in today’s society, mainly by changing their roles and functions. I believe that libraries cannot effectively do this without recognizing the right for people to be informed and the right for one to express one self. In the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which provides common standards for all nations and information workers, Article 19 stipulates that: *“Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers”*(UNDHR 1948), Furthermore, Article 27 stipulates that *“ Everyone has the right freely to participate in the cultural life of the community, to enjoy the arts and share in scientific advancement and its benefits”*. Recognizing such fundamental rights would mean defining and understanding the knowledge society and information society as inclusive as opposed to exclusive and non discriminatory, and would mean not relegating the benefits of IS and KS only to the information elite (as it generally tends to happen due to the ‘digital divide’). There is a growing amount of preparedness by African governments to actively partake in the knowledge and information society. For example, most recently has been Africa’s endorsement of the World Summit on Information Society resolutions and declarations at both Geneva in 2003 and Tunis (2005), which sketched the way forward in the development of an information and knowledge society. Governments’ commitment to an information and knowledge society is instrumental, I believe, by way of supporting libraries to spearhead its development

## **2. African Libraries: An Overview**

Africa is the second largest continent in land size and the first in terms of the number of nations in the world, with 53 independent countries and a population of approximately 934,238,426 million people (as at 2008)<sup>3</sup>, but also the poorest in economical terms. Most African countries only received their political independence from colonialists (France, Britain, and Portugal) in the second decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. It is therefore not surprising that libraries in Africa have always tended to serve the privileged, i.e. the colonialists of the past, and the educated, and economically sated urban ‘settlers’ of the present. According to my own knowledge and observation, perhaps also shared by others, the view of library services is based on the assumption that library users know how to read and write, or are functionally literate in at least one non-African language (such as English, French, Portuguese), reside in urban areas (where they are closer to the library), and are aware of what the library provides even if the content is not relevant to their needs. A

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3 (see [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List\\_of\\_African\\_countries\\_by\\_population](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_African_countries_by_population))

speech by the former Minister of Education of South Africa in 2002 reveals that in South Africa, with its 48 million people, *“3.5 million adults over the age of 16 have never attended school; another 2.5 million adults have lost their earlier ability to read or write. That makes essentially 6 million South Africans who are essentially barred from the written word, from the whole universe of information and imagination that books hold; and also from the more functional everyday empowerment that written languages gives – for employment, for travel and to be a responsible citizen”* (Speech by the Minister of Education, Professor Kader Asmal in Nassimbeni, May 2006:13). A more recent speech by Pallo Jordan (2007), South Africa’s Minister of Arts and Culture, paints a bleaker picture still: *“....51% of South Africans have no books in their homes. A mere 14% of the population read books and only 5% of these read to their children”* (Jordan, 2007).

The two ministers speeches, made within an interval of five years, provide an example of how an African population can be economically deprived, geographically isolated, and culturally and socially marginalized through illiteracy. Yet even though colonial ideas still dictate literacy in the form of reading and writing, oral traditions have been the dominant mode of knowledge acquisition, processing, storage, dissemination and sharing before, during and post colonial rule amongst most of the African populace. These oral traditions have not been sufficiently exploited in attempts to make libraries more relevant to those who are destitute or marginalized in their own countries due to economic poverty. The marginalized include rural people who are often geographically isolated because of poor communication and transportation systems; those disadvantaged by cultural and social poverty and deprivation, especially the illiterate; the elderly, women, and children; those who are discriminated against because of their race, ethnicity, creed or religion; and the physically disabled. The question that has not been fully answered regards how to supplement modern ways of information access with oral traditions( eg story telling) in order to make information , particularly the local content, accessible.

While focusing on academic, public, school and special libraries as well as LIS education and training in Africa, it becomes clear that both availability and accessibility are critical in order to ensure that libraries fulfil their role, which is to inform, entertain, enlighten, educate, empower and equip individuals and communities with knowledge and information for self-reliance and for life-long learning. Thus, libraries inadvertently enable individuals to fulfil their social roles and obligations in society knowingly and responsibly.

Academic libraries are relatively better equipped and resourced than other libraries in Africa. Their establishment and development has not been stagnant because academic institutions (Higher Education Institutions-

HEIs) in most African countries are compelled by most governments to establish libraries as a requirement and maintain them for accreditation. Beyond this, HEIs have been left alone to equip the libraries as they wish with a fraction of the subsidization they receive from government or other affiliations, and there is therefore significant variation in their development and growth, both in quantity and quality. While there is a general consensus in many studies that academic libraries in Africa do not have a staffing problem, most studies agree (eg Raju and Raju 2008) with the problems identified in a study on the status of academic libraries in Africa by Rosenberg (1997). The study revealed that libraries are poorly funded, with budgets that are either non-existent, declining or rarely honoured; collection development is often either minimal or non-existent; there is too much expenditure on staff (some libraries are overstaffed) at the expense of acquisitions; there is over dependence on [foreign] external funding, which is sometimes estimated to be as high as 90-100% in some libraries; ICTs aren't sufficiently utilized and networks suffer poor connectivity; and resource sharing is not a common practice. Reggie Raju from the University of KwaZulu Natal library and Jaya Raju (2008) from the Durban University of Technology, discuss the issues and challenges facing academic libraries, and while agreeing with studies focusing on this library category, recommend minimal benchmarking for academic libraries. The two authors reiterate that cost reduction, income generation, resource sharing, rational staffing, ICT application and the reduction of donor dependency engender sustainability and therefore require everyone's critical attention.

Most public libraries in Africa play a dual role as Public Libraries and National Libraries, with the exception of countries such as South Africa where the two types of libraries are separate. Public libraries receive significant attention worldwide, and the UNESCO Public Library Manifesto provides guidelines and moral support for their development. The Manifesto that is familiar to most of us states that, *"The public library, the local gateway to knowledge, provides a basic condition for lifelong learning, independent decision – making and cultural development of the individual and social groups. The Manifesto proclaims UNESCO's belief in the public library as a living force for education, culture and information, as an essential agent for the fostering of peace and spiritual welfare through the minds of men and women"* (IFLA/UNESCO public library manifesto, 1994). Unfortunately, public library development in Africa has received strong criticism. For example, in a report in a book edited by Issak (2000) on public librarianship in a segment of Africa (10 English Speaking African [Anglophone] countries) whose observations are still real today, the findings echoed poor services, declining budgets, lack of resources, outdated materials, lack of planning, inadequate knowledge of the information needs of the users, and poverty. This report partly blamed the western model of the public



library system on the poor state of the libraries. Other studies concur with Issak's report, stating that most of Africa's population has yet to experience the library and its services because of a long history of elitism, urban-centrism and Euro-centrism (e.g. Sturges & Neil, 1990). The argument presented by these authors is that libraries in Africa still remain largely stocked with Western literature, most of which is written in non-African languages. Several authors in this collected work suggested the need for alternative services such as community information services, and impact assessments of public library services. Government commitment, improvements in the professional commitment of librarians, and the provision of resources were also considered essential areas of focus. The community library concept is also, by all appearances, a viable way to deliver information to the poor and marginalized from a public library platform. But I would strongly concur with Rosenberg's view that *"Originating from the initiative of a group from the community or an aid agency, their birth is followed by a year or two of rapid growth and a good deal of local publicity and attention. This is followed by a period of slow decline, accompanied by theft, the departure of the initiators, loss of interest among staff and users—the library still exists but signs of life are barely discernible. Sometimes this period continues indefinitely, but often a final stage is reached when all remaining books are removed, stolen, or damaged beyond repair and the premises and staff are allocated to another activity"* (Rosenberg in Mostert, 2001: Lack of sustained effort to find an alternative library framework). However, this does not mean that community libraries or information resource centres are irrelevant. Mchombu (2004) passionately demonstrates how they should work in his chapter on the content of information and knowledge in community resource centres and information sharing and processing, and how to keep the community information resource centre alive; and also provides four interesting case studies and lessons learnt at grassroots level on setting up community information resource centres.

Issac Kigongo- Bukenya(2008) from the East African School of Library and Information Science, Uganda, addresses the issues and challenges of an institution that is highly regarded and trusted by the international information community [public library] for changing the lives of many people in the world by providing a facility for life long learning. In his final remarks in the chapter, he observes that although public libraries have existed in Africa for a long time, their development in different parts of the continent is not uniform; support for public libraries by African governments and civil society is minimal; and in many countries, public library provision and services have declined to an alarming extent. Isaac, like many critics of public library development in Africa, associates the decline with what he calls the *"alien and elitist nature of the public library; the failure of the public library to identify with community needs, therefore offering irrelevant services; lack of appropriate information materials; lack of proper staffing;*

*and finally lack of committed institutional budgets and consequently donor funding dependency*". He recognizes new, sometimes politicized initiatives, such as Reading Tents - Uganda; The Village Reading Rooms Programme (VRRP) – Botswana; the Rural Libraries and Resource Development Programme (RLRDP) - Zimbabwe; and in Kenya, the Camel Library Service (CLS), to name a few. However, whether these initiatives are practical, sustainable, apolitical, and address the gaps created by Western oriented public libraries depends on the outcome of their evaluation or impact assessment, if they last that long.

School libraries, as outlined in the School Library Manifesto, are to provide *"information and ideas that are fundamental to functioning successfully in today's information and knowledge-based society. The school library equips students with life-long learning skills and develops the imagination, enabling them to live as responsible citizens"* (IFLA/UNESCO School Library Manifesto, 2006). While most countries in Africa have embraced the creation of libraries in tertiary or higher education institutions (HEIs) both as a government requirement and to enable accreditation, schools in Africa are not compelled to establish schools libraries as a statutory requirement. Ultimately, most schools in Africa do not have schools libraries. Therefore the golden objectives of school libraries expressed in the IFLA School Libraries Manifesto are irrelevant, theoretical or academic to most schools on the continent. Even relatively well developed African countries, such as South Africa, have less than 30 % (some sources quote approximately 20%) of school libraries. The most commonly cited reason is the absence of school library policies, the argument being that if library policies work for academic institutions, why not for schools. Robert Ikoja-Odongo (2008) from the East African School of Library and Information Science at Makerere University, Uganda, provides an insightful account into the development of school libraries in parts of Africa, and concludes by stating that governments should consider developing and implementing genuine school library policies in every country, recognizing and employing trained professionals for the management of the libraries and the provision of services, providing space and accommodation for the libraries and restoring them appropriately, promoting a local languages publishing programme, and developing a curriculum that demands resource based and learner centered education.

Special libraries are individual, private or government information centers that serve the information needs of a specific user group, e.g. parliamentarians, the physically disabled, lawyers, researchers or prisoners. From this definition, one can see that it would be difficult to quantify special libraries because of their obscure existence and services. In Africa, special libraries have a multiplicity of other names, such as documentation centers, information centers, etc. Their collections are normally subject specific, i.e.

music, art, rare documents/books etc. They are not considered public, national, academic or school libraries; although some may serve both their parent organization and the general public (for example, the Library of the Blind). Janneke Mostert( 2008), from the Department of Library and Information Science, University of Zululand, South Africa, discusses the status and noteworthy developments and challenges of special libraries. She notes that special libraries have existed for a while in Africa, with ancient repositories in Mali (Timbuktu), Egypt, and Ethiopia; and their development has been re-active rather than pro-active, which has hampered their growth. At present, stronger growth and development has been observed in Egypt, Kenya, Nigeria and South Africa, particularly in the government ministries/departments, Non Governmental Organizations (NGOs) and corporate sectors. It was noted that the challenges facing special library development include marginalization, collection development (e.g local content, digitization), capacity building, application of ICTs, networking, and resource sharing. These challenges can be turned into opportunities if attention is redirected to the development of consortia, benchmarking and the measurement of values/standards, ICTs, collection development, staff development and the increased visibility of the libraries.

Coming to library and information education and training, common trends are noted in the following areas: the growth of LIS schools - now over 55; review and revision of curricula; increased use of information and communication technologies (ICTs); the rise and fall of student numbers depending on market forces; amalgamation and reorientation of LIS programmes for viability; relocation of the academic administration of LIS schools; and the expansion and closure of LIS schools (See Ocholla 2008, Ocholla & Bothma, 2007; Minishi-Majanja and Ocholla, 2004.). Bosire Onyancha and Mabel Minishi-Majanja (2008), both from the University of South Africa, recognised and discussed the enumerated trends and concluded that LIS education and training in Africa has recorded significant growth in research productivity.

I believe that impact studies and the benchmarking of libraries in Africa are essential practices, and improving overall literacy levels and basic adult education through libraries are areas that require further exploration. A recent (2007) IFLA publication [series 127] written by Roswitha Poll and Peter te Boekhorst on “Performance Measurement in Libraries”, which describes the performance indicators and focuses on resources and infrastructure, use, efficiency, and potential and development; could be used to benchmark African libraries.



### 3. Challenges and Opportunities

The major challenge for libraries in our society is to reach as many people as possible and make a difference in their lives. I would like to enumerate and highlight a few other challenges.

- Access to information is inhibited by inequalities, some of which originate from marginalisation by geographical location, culture, physical status, race, gender, religion, economic-poverty, political displacement, and freedom of expression.
- Access requires the provision of appropriate content, infrastructure, and bridging the 'knowledge divide' by all means possible. Issues stemming from lack of content in indigenous languages, adult education, lack of school libraries and school library policies, and whether and how information literacy should be conducted by libraries also inhibit access
- The technology provision, acquisition, sustainability, use, and impact is also crucial. Is relevant or appropriate technology available in libraries? How far are the libraries networked or tapping into virtual global knowledge? Internet access (essentially a library within a library or virtual library) within libraries has become a major service that libraries increasingly provide and should provide because such access creates a window through which individuals can access virtual knowledge resources, and the window increases the libraries' capacity to offer more diversified information while encouraging the use of other sources and promoting interest in the library.
- The creation of a learning society by promoting lifelong learning through adult education and training, information literacy, and encouraging apprenticeship and voluntarism is needed. Lifelong learning also means encouraging research, innovation, and publication. Essentially, research creates new knowledge by interrogating existing knowledge and practices and improving products, services, activities and programmes. Innovation is fundamental in the provision of new and unique services or competitive products.
- Finally, there is the problem of content, such as local or indigenous knowledge. Good content should be sensitive to language and cultural diversity and knowledge, and represent local content relevant to community needs. Would the engagement of publishers, writers, distributors, creating local repositories and translations improve on content?

I have recognised some of these challenges from within the context of information accessibility to the marginalised community (Ocholla 2006) and benchmarking library services, performance measurement, policy, adult literacy, information literacy, community libraries and community resource centres. The issue of telecentres (see Snyman and Snyman 2003) is also worth revisiting for facilitating access to ICT.

Bridging the digital divide is both a challenge and an opportunity. Opportunities lie in the availability of publication initiatives that are free of charge, as highlighted by Derek Law (2003:18), as follows:

- ‘Electronic Information For Libraries’ (EIFL), sponsored by the Open Society Institute (OSI), whose aim it is to provide “*low-cost access research materials identified by the consortia for North-South transfer as well as encouraging lateral transfer of materials between developing countries and countries in transition*”. (Law, 2003:18)
- The Health Internet Work Access to Research Initiative (HINARI), which aims to “*provide free or very low cost access to scientific journals in biomedical and related social sciences to public institutions in the developing countries*”.
- The International Network for the Availability of Scientific Publications (INASP) PERI Programme (see [www.inasp.info](http://www.inasp.info)), set up by the International Council of Scientific Unions (ICSU) in 1992 and 2002 by PERI. It has four components (i.e. the acquisition of full text journals, and databases and document delivery; regional and national online services for the dissemination of local research; ICT skills for information literacy; and publishing competencies) aimed at “*creating a sustainable environment for the dissemination of research literature*”.
- The Directory of Open Access Journals - DOAJ (see [www.ldoaj.org/articles/about](http://www.ldoaj.org/articles/about) ) - whose aim it is to increase the “*visibility of and simplify access to all open access scientific and scholarly journals whose content is governed by either peer review or some other forms of quality control*”.
- Scientific Electronic Library Online (SciELO) – a model for cooperative electronic publishing in developing countries that “*makes available 164 full text scientific journals*”. The idea is that the increasing availability of publication initiatives should enable libraries to bring virtual and digital libraries to their libraries and improve collection and accessibility.
- Open Access Initiatives (OAI), where libraries are expected to play a crucial role in the development or hosting of institutional repositories and enable rapid access to scholarly information and knowledge.

Thus, libraries changing role is to participate in scholarly communication by supporting electronic scholarly knowledge products and in so doing, provide and organise digital content through institutional repositories. There is evidence, for example, in Australia (see Horwood, Sullivan, Young and Garner, 2004) and I believe also in South Africa, where such initiatives focusing on the role of libraries in the development of institutional repositories and the benefits arising from the changing functions of libraries (including technical requirements) are represented. I believe that OAI has many advantages stemming from its ability to increase relevancy, use, recognition, advocacy and promotion, accountability, visibility (see Onyancha, 2007a) and access in modern times. It is recognised that such initiatives go hand in hand with issues and knowledge of metadata, communication skills, advocacy and promotion, intellectual property, peer review, mediation, costs, and preservation.

The changing roles of libraries will also create what Jennifer Rowley terms “*knowledge management - the new librarianship...*” (Rowley, 2003). Rowley (2003:438-439), sees the present-future role of the librarian as divided into three areas (at the very least): managing knowledge repositories (e.g. evaluation, filtering, signposting, structuring, facilitating access, repackaging and presenting knowledge); facilitating knowledge flow (e.g. gate keeping); and communication and leveraging value generating capacity (integrates all three).

## **Conclusions**

Libraries in Africa could potentially spur on the current knowledge and information society. For example, South Africa is endowed with a strong economy and extensive information resources, systems and services (see Mostert, 2005); and has one of the fastest growing information and communication technology infrastructures in Africa. The opportunities for libraries in the information society in Africa lie in information content diversification for inclusivity by, among other things, recognizing cultural and linguistic diversity, and making use of the multiple channels through which one can access information. Africa has burgeoning higher education institutions, and the continent's sensitivity to transformation, redress and equity is growing. Academic libraries [libraries within higher education institutions] in Africa that are relatively well resourced (for example in terms of staffing) should champion modern service delivery in the information society. A strong role can also be played by professional associations at national and regional levels (such as Standing Conference of Eastern, Central and Southern Africa-SCECSAL). We believe that regional professional activities support and boost weak national associations through information and knowledge sharing and benchmarking based on the recognition of

similarities rather than differences as would be witnessed the annual International Conference Crimea, Sudak, Ukraine . For example, the Library and Information Association of South Africa (LIASA), which recently (2007) hosted IFLA's annual conference in Durban, is the largest and arguably fastest growing library and information association in Africa. There is tangible interest being shown by government to support library and information development through the adoption and implementation of various policies, legislations and management structures (such as National Council for Library and Information Services-NCLIS in South Africa). The library and information research community is also very vibrant (see Ocholla and Ocholla, 2007 and Onyancha, 2007b), meaning that the continent has the potential to transform the challenges cited into opportunities. These achievements should be recognized in order for good practices to be widely supported, shared and implemented.

Doors should be wide open in Africa, as it has occurred in recent years through regional (e.g Southern African Development Community-SADC) and continental (e.g The New Partnership for Africa's Development- NEPAD) or international (e.g World Summit on Information Society) initiatives and collaborations, in government and civil society. to discuss, plan, implement and evaluate social interventions and enable libraries to benefit from sustainable, healthy and appropriate practices in order to proactively spearhead the growth of the knowledge and information society. It is worth singling out projects and activities that deal with information literacy, adult education, community information services within public libraries, school and public library services, ICT access and the use of wireless technology, the Open Access Initiative (OAI), institutional repositories, and the review and adoption of the resolutions of the "World Summit on Information Society"; to guide future library development. These should coincide with poverty alleviation, the promotion of freedom of access and freedom of expression, and a general literacy campaign. Suffice to say that a model for engineering the knowledge and information society by libraries is urgently required both within and outside the outlined framework. African libraries, through collaboration and knowledge/ information sharing (as it happens in South African libraries) have the potential to model the libraries of tomorrow. While recognizing and modifying the resolutions of the Geneva (2003) and the Tunis (2005) World Summit on Information Society for future reference, a library charter on knowledge and information management in Africa within the framework of NEPAD, even on a small scale, should be planned and implemented.

I wish to recommend that we modify and adopt the resolutions of the Geneva (2003) and Tunis (2005) World Summit on Information Society in the belief that a library charter on knowledge and information management in Africa

would benefit strongly from the Summit's document (see: <http://www.itu.int/wsis/docs2/tunis/off/7.html>).

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